

Ak Welsapar: COBRA

Russian, fiction

Report by Andrew Bromfield

Synopsis

*Rejoice, o people, your every day is like a great festival!
You are ruled by the celestial symbol of the age!
The bright sun in the sky, the glorious Hero is he,
and we are spots of his light.*

These are the final ironic words of Ak Welsapar's novel *Cobra* (first published in Tula in 2005), a work of kaleidoscopic satire with an obvious major target – the despotic regime of Saparmurat Niyazov (self-dubbed “Turkmenbashi” or “leader of all Turkmen”). As a writer at the top of the “black list” of authors whose works are banned in Turkmenia, Welsapar – who now lives in exile in Sweden – is intimately acquainted with this regime and the society that it governs.

In the former Soviet Central Asian Republics, the heritage of top-heavy Soviet-style administration and local conditions, such as a clan-based model of social interaction, combined to produce a specific (and specifically unpleasant) form of nominal democracy, effectively dictatorships led by former Soviet officials. In Uzbekistan, for instance they got Islam Karimov, in Turkmenistan they got Turkmenbashi. Human rights are regularly violated in the interests of power and opposition in all its forms (from Western-style liberalism to radical Islamism) is vigorously suppressed. In the novel “Cobra” the Turkmenbashi character is referred to by the absurdly clumsy title “Mr. Comrade President” which, however, neatly encapsulates the hybrid democratic/Soviet/dictatorial nature of the regime he operates, and also indicates the tone of absurdist mockery adopted in the book towards the president's megalomaniac buffoonery.

The central device of the text is drawn from Turkmen folk legends about animals being able to transform into human beings (and back again). Thus, the Cobra of the title transforms himself a provincial villain in order to seek revenge on these humans who have destroyed his environment with their toxic fertilisers (another integral element of the heritage of the Soviet era, when the monoculture of cotton, with its intensive use of defoliants and fertilisers, inflicted irreparable damage on the environment and the natural economy.)

After the initial scene has been set with a couple of chapters in a straightforward, almost folk idiom that also sets the basic style for the book's magical realist narrative, chapter 3 gives us “The Cobra sheds his skin”, with the snake's arrival in a town and retreat to some ruins for the transformation into a human being.

“Before appearing among people, he had to shed his skin and learn how to walk like a man, and that was not easy for him, especially after the exhausting hibernation underground. In order to live among people and not arouse suspicion, he had to become like them, at least externally.”

Adopting the name of Musa Choli, with the help of his hypnotic powers and other abilities the Cobra rises up through the power structure to become a member of Mr. Comrade President's inner circle, before being exposed as a traitor. In the course of his career he observes the absurd behaviour of people around him. In this early episode, for instance, the snake is brought face to face with the self-praising hypocrisy underlying material privilege.

“The women coyly touched their lips to their glasses of expensive wine as the member of the Bureau completed his speech on a high note:

“ ‘Our country is the highest example for imitation by all the states of the world. Our people imbibe the state’s slogans not only with their eyes and ears, but with their entire being. For they know that life has its beginning and its end in the bosom of the state. And if we did not protect like the very apple of our eye the difference between the food of the simple folk and that of Mr Comrade President, this faith would be less strong.’

“The snake winced inwardly: was he really ready for life in human society? It seemed that people, these primitive two-legged creatures, could sometimes be more cunning than snakes.”

The Cobra also witnesses the head of the “Institute of Languages” giving this explanation of the national Constitution:

“To every article of the Fundamental law there is appended a special list of those to whom it applies. For example, freedom of speech is the personal prerogative of Mr. Comrade President, and he apportions democracy for the current needs of the state apparatus. In particular, for the needs of those state institutions working in the international arena, so that when necessary they can regale foreign correspondents and highly placed officials with it. Our national democracy has a very distinctive flavour, especially when served with the local wines, valuable gifts and multimillion-dollar contracts for cheap oil, gas and other natural mineral resources.”

The numerous scenes described as Musa Choli rises to the very top of the regime – becoming involved along the way in some of its atrocities – produce a cumulative effect that could be called a portrait of the psychology of a dictatorship.

In the final chapter, when he realises that he has been discovered, the Cobra wonders if there is any sense in still trying to achieve the revenge he was planning by killing Mr. Comrade President.

“The most important discovery made by the Cobra during his time among people was that the disasters suffered by his own kind were also shared by people. They were suicidally sawing off the very branch on which they were sitting. On whom, then, should he take his revenge, and for what? ...

“He already knew who took all the obviously stupid and disastrous decisions, it was only a small bunch of people whose brazenness knew no bounds because they always went unpunished. But were they really people, if they behaved like the devil’s own deputies ... [and] created a system to protect their power, in which even those with the most scrupulous consciences could not even raise their own voices, let alone try to influence others against the devil’s work.”

Eventually having decided to take his revenge anyway, the Cobra (moving through the presidential palace in his snake form) comes upon Mr. Comrade President playing a game of cards with his chief aid, Larin, for power in the state, and fears that, if Larin wins, ecological devastation in the country will become even worse. He joins in the game, only to discover that it was a trap set especially for him

He is forced to flee to save his life, with the President and Larin in pursuit, transformed into a monitor lizard and a gigantic praying mantis respectively. The lizard fights the Cobra and weakens him, and the mantis eats out one of his eyes. They are joined in the attack by other transformed allies of the president. When they eventually all abandon the Cobra, a bird appears in the sky and drops a fancy-patterned handkerchief on him that burns his skin. Left for dead, the Cobra uses his final ounces of strength to flee back to the sandy desert from which he came.

As he leaves, he wonders if he had been wrong to nurture his resentment against people when perhaps “what they really need is comfort, help, salvation? But who is going to help them, who will save them, if not themselves?”

This is a book of powerful satirical comment, rendered very readable by dead-pan, yet searing humour. It provides invaluable insight into the post-Soviet situation in Turkmenistan and I would recommend it strongly for translation.

Sample Translation by Andrew Bromfield

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Street of Dark Lamps

Yes, people are the strangest creatures in the world. You never know whether to love them or hate them. This was the conclusion reached, after long reflection, not only by the very wisest of reptiles, but also by the very wisest of men – Mr. Comrade President. He was always on his guard with those who disliked him, but he was even more wary of those who swore their love and devotion to him. “What does this person want from me?” he would ask himself when he heard those sickly-sweet effusive outpourings. “What kind of fright is it that makes him strain himself so hard? He must be preparing some dirty trick for me.” And there was one paradox that astounded him most of all: the thing for which they lauded and honoured him now was the very thing for which they had despised him previously: “If you exclude the possibility that people can love and despise someone for one and the same thing, then this is simply crude, bare-faced deception,” – that was how he ultimately explained this phenomenon to himself. There had been times when people regarded him, an orphan, with suspicion and were afraid to invite him into their houses – what if he took something away with him? And now, on the contrary, everyone liked the fact that he didn’t have a heap of relatives. But then, that was easy enough to understand: the relatives of the leading individual in the state would undoubtedly have latched on tight to the state treasury. But since he didn’t have that ballast, others could occupy the places at the feeding trough. And these people really did dote on him, they never tired of phoning absolutely everywhere and telling everybody what an incredibly gentle, noble and magnanimous man he was, how he helped everyone and never let a single good deed go without its due reward. He understood the true worth of all these eulogies to his person. But it all suited him perfectly, and what’s more, he was prepared to maintain the rules of this game. You want to see me as an imperious and magnanimous potentate – here, take what you ordered!

However, acting like a narcotic, the torrents of flattery gradually stupefied his mind to such an extent that he himself could no longer understand what kind of man he really was, while the others were not even interested in *that*. And when he noticed this indifference peeping out from under the mask of flattery, he felt bitterly offended. Every mongrel dog knew its place in the world, but he didn’t, essentially he was no more than a puppet in the hands of powerful, determined, cunning puppet-masters. And the only reason why he now found himself at the very peak of the pyramid of power was that somebody profited from it. Even if he felt any desire to stop playing this role, he would not be allowed to do so. And he was powerless to alter this state of affairs, he could not even adjust it ever so slightly – the system would not allow it.

Before he had acquired the title of Mr. Comrade President, there were times when he had tried to become his own self, to make friends with people. If that had happened, at least he would not have been as tragically lonely as he was now. But it had all come to nothing, in response they

had even taken away his final crumbs of liberty. And so he had come to realise that from now on for him everything had to be corporate – and that included feelings as well. That was when he started feeling really afraid and his persecution complex began to develop: from one day to the next he expected some kind of catastrophe that would reduce him to an absolute nobody. The catastrophe didn't happen, but even so he decided in his own mind that it wasn't worth exposing himself too much if that was not what he was supposed to do. He began acting with extreme caution and eventually succeeded in transforming himself into his own shadow ... It was as if he existed, but at the same time he didn't! He did everything that he was told to do, and it didn't matter in the least whether the person who told him was higher or lower than him in rank. And so, step by step, he won for himself a place in the sun that no one had ever even attempted to occupy hitherto.

Those who formerly had not been able to stand him, gradually found themselves in a state of inconspicuous but nonetheless firm dependence upon ... upon whom? Why, upon Nobody! Very soon they were simply unable to manage without him, without this full-grown errand boy. Many were genuinely grateful to him, simply because that was how they had been raised and they were used to saying thank you for every service rendered, not because they really found him likeable. A nobody is a nobody. But habit is a sly, subtle thing, it's very hard to break. And they had got used to thanking him. And therefore, when the time came for him to be promoted to a higher position, no one was opposed to it; neither the lower ranks, nor the upper ranks; and he began to grow and grow, like a toxic toadstool in the shade of tall, centuries-old trees, building up more and more weight under his apparently edible, but actually poisonous cap. And one day it became simply impossible not to notice him. On his path to the top there had been much that was painful, much that was foul. How many times he had been humiliated, how many times he had abased himself: lied, cheated, informed, betrayed. But what point was there in remembering that ...

All this had used up too much of his strength, dented and pitted his memory, erasing from it everything good and benign that he had experienced in life, while the evil he had done to others became firmly lodged. Afraid of losing power because of his fits of forgetfulness, to secure himself he focused all his attention on a single thought: Who obeyed his will and who did not? This thought gradually became an *idée fixe*. He genuinely did not understand why good was preferable to evil. But one thing that he really could do better than many others was to make speeches in an exalted rhetorical style. And he was also very adroit in setting his subordinates at each others' throats, in forcing them – his presumed friends and presumed enemies – to squabble among themselves, betray and inform.

Basically, these two talents of his were the foundation of the atmosphere of stability in the country. He had learned the lessons of the Higher Party School and the Orphanage very well, after all. In both institutions they knew how to manipulate people.

Once having fine-tuned the customary political situation in the country after a fashion close to his own heart, he began taking things more easily: now all that remained for him to do was to learn to dress elegantly, wear a tie and observe with cool detachment everything that came to pass each day in this country, according to his supreme will.

Mr. Comrade President put his open palm to his artificial hair and stroked it, looked at himself in the mirror and gasped: how frail and impermanent all things in this world were! Was it not only yesterday that he had been a youth with a luxuriant head of hair, still poor and unknown, and today he had everything, except for that head of hair. He wept bitter tears as he remembered the poor days of his youth and examined his own image in the mirror. But he was slightly reassured by the fact that his face still retained an almost childish, gentle expression, and his portraits constantly grew younger.

He smiled to himself: the snow that had fallen so abundantly on his head in foreign parts had melted long ago, he was at home now, and was not that why he grew younger every day? As God was his witness, he had not gone adventuring in a foreign country for his own pleasure, he had been accumulating wisdom, mastering exotic sciences, doing a bit of spying, sometimes taking risks when he had nothing else to occupy his time – he had admired the beauty of nature in foreign parts and sighed for the land of his fathers, until one day he realised that now he knew how to rule the country. Then he had returned to his homeland. He had returned as a conqueror, but people did not know that yet, and so no one had taken fright, they had not even noticed his arrival. He was in no hurry and he had waited calmly for his hour to come. But he had not wasted any time, either, day and night he had taken pains to help people, and they had gradually begun to yield to his wiles, to walk into his trap. They had not taken him seriously, they had set his coltish love no higher than the importunate attentions of a stray puppy, allowed him to lick their hands, yap and run around in circles. But he had only been laughing at them. After all, he had known beforehand that eventually he would win the most important thing – power – from all of them. This was guaranteed by people’s general indifference to their own fate, their own future, everybody was concerned only with their routine business, with achieving the most short-term of mercantile goals, in order to survive and not find themselves any worse off than others. And therefore they had all wasted time fussing over trivial, foolish things, while imagining, however, that they were industrious bees. They had hardly even noticed him spinning around under their feet, only remembering him when they had urgent need of his inexpensive services. And that was all that he needed. He polished someone’s shoes, and repaired someone else’s roof. Later there had been more serious commissions – there was even an incident in which he had had to neutralise a jealous wife; of course, he hadn’t done everything with his own hands: they hired him, and he hired others. In the end it had turned out that everybody owed him something, was obliged to him for something. Who, then, ought to grow and advance up the ladder of state service, if not him? People had poked fun at his unfailingly obliging attitude, they had laughed, but he had smiled back at them, with the smile of an innocent infant. He had carried on brewing the tea for his superiors and his subordinates, fiddling with the dirty kettles and teapots ...

For the time being, they had believed so firmly in his insignificance that they never took him into account. When they went visiting women, for instance, they used to take him with them so that he could amuse the madams, who, as a rule, were older women who could have been his mother or, at best, his older sister. He had performed this “little job”, as he called it, with great relish, and never grumbled. When his bosses withdrew to the bedrooms with the young prostitutes, he had amused the madams in the hallway. Sometimes his bosses, feeling delighted with themselves, would stick their heads out of the bedrooms for a second to order a drink, or something else, and he was always right there. But once Larin had caught him out. On emerging from the room he saw that he was being rather naughty with the elderly madam, and had actually got quite carried away with his naughtiness.

“For crying out loud!” Larin had laughed.

“I’m unwinding ...” had been the imperturbable reply.

“Well, how’s it going? Not being too mean to you, is she? And in general, is she fit for service?”

“Why certainly, what could be more desirable in the summer heat than the cold embraces of an old woman!” he had said, laughing it off.

But when Larin was already his assistant, he had had to seek his advice on a genuinely serious matter:

“Help me, my lady is refusing to have an abortion ...”

Larin had looked at him in extreme surprise, raised one hand to his broad forehead in an edifying dumb show, allowing his hopeless boss to admire the massive wedding ring on his fourth finger, and said:

“Tomorrow we’ll go and see her together. You’ll have to live with her for a while and win her trust, otherwise there’ll be a scandal; madams are a special breed, trifling with them is not recommended, if they decide to give you a bad name, then you can kiss your career goodbye. This is too serious altogether. But I have a plan maturing in my mind, you do as I tell you, and we’ll get out of this scrape ...”

The next morning the two of them arrived together at the place where he had so imprudently left behind his own living trace. The woman greeted them joyfully, as the future wife of her intended, and laid the table for a meal. They ate and drank ... When everyone’s mood was elevated enough, Larin offered to take a souvenir snap of them and he took out his camera to record the happy moment: the madam on the knees of her beloved.

“I’m not photogenic ...” the old fright said, trying to wriggle out of this procedure, just in case, but that was exactly what Larin needed, and he asked her to turn this way and that way, and managed to take a lot of snaps of different poses while she was doing it. As soon as the flash of the camera glinted in the window, there was a sudden tramping of feet and a moment later a peremptory ring at the doorbell. The local militiaman and members of the volunteer people’s militia, with red armbands, came piling into the house and, citing some serious information from the neighbours, began searching everyone present. Naturally, all they found on Larin was the camera, but they found narcotics on *him* and his lover. Before he even realised what was happening, the handcuffs had clicked shut, connecting him with her. And in the meantime Larin’s camera simply went wild, flashing every second, before disappearing back into his pocket. The militiaman and the people’s volunteer militia took no notice, they were too busy drawing up their report. Then Larin took the representative of the law to one side.

“I request you to release my subordinate on my recognizance, I promise to keep him under control. I shall act in accordance with the circumstances and the established rules ... the training of personnel is too serious a matter to be entrusted entirely to the agencies of law-enforcement.”

He had stood there, observing the scene. The local militiaman had found Larin’s words to his liking, he had smiled and shaken Larin by the hand.

“Thank you comrade!” Then the militiaman had come over to him and said: “Larin will look after you for the rest of your life. You must constantly thank him for giving you your freedom: he’s a wonderful man. Other men do nothing but look out for a convenient opportunity to get their boss put away behind bars, but he, as you can see, is offering you the hand of friendship, it’s your duty never to forget about this for as long you live. He and I are old friends, and you understand me when I say that I donned the uniform of the militia because of the weather conditions. So listen to me: on the day that you disobey him, you will join your beloved in prison. I think you understand that this poor creature will never find a better husband than you and will remain faithful to you and, who knows, may even give birth to your child. Everything will depend on how you behave ...”

“You can’t be a serious man without serious problems!” Larin had explained amiably as he saw the guardians of order and the old madam to the door. When they were out in the street, he had clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Well, now you’re a real man, you know what they say: The begging-bowl and prison are always waiting. While I’m beside you, you don’t have to worry about a thing. I’ll handle everything in this life, but in the next world, I hope you’ll manage for yourself. The important thing now is the madam. None of the rest matters a damn. I despise ordinary mortals – those people with clean hands and nothing at all to their name apart from the desire to earn their daily bread. Politicians are a different matter altogether: some of them are up

to their throats in shit, and some in blood, that's why they all appear so cultured and law-abiding. You understand what a heavy burden I've taken on, and I hope that from now on you will start to grow as a politician, not by the day, but by the hour!" He was overcome by a sudden fit of merriment. He laughed and gave the hand of the hapless specialist in elderly matrons a firm shake. "I'm proud of you! You could say that today we have become relatives, blood brothers!"

And he had broken into tears and put his arms round Larin's neck.

"Then this means I'm not alone now? I'm not an orphan any more, am I?"

"That's right!" Larin replied firmly. "I am adopting you ... And if you wish, you may adopt me ... It certainly won't do our cause any harm, on the contrary!"

And they had embraced each other tightly and laughed long and loud.

"Today's setback should be crowned with a triumph!" Larin exclaimed, breathing deep of the intoxicating night air of the capital. "Some good friends of mine who are very pretty live in this house here. Why don't we call on them for a cup of coffee? Especially since they'll be very glad to see us."

Larin led him by the hand into a flat on the first floor of a large block of flats and showed him that he was perfectly safe here, the business with the detestable madam, who apparently had also been a little hunchbacked, had been his own personal blunder. The women greeted them joyfully, as if they'd been waiting for them all their lives. They weren't exactly beauties, but one of them was nice-looking enough, even if she did smell of cheap perfume. As if she realised in advance that she was not just catering for anyone, but her own future husband, she spent the entire night with him, only leaving for a short while when Larin called her or on her own urgent business. Then she came back and humoured him like her most favourite client. In the morning she said goodbye to him with tears in her eyes, and she also found time to bake some pies with cabbage for him to take to work. The only firm lesson that he learned from this adventure was that he should never again show himself in this house of casual pleasures. Or else he might end up marrying a woman who was older and cleverer than he was. For three days he did not remember the woman even once, but on the fourth day he saw that he was in a bad way: there was pus oozing out of the end of his intimate organ ...

"Can't you do something, my brother?" he appealed to Larin.

Larin bit his lip.

"Hmm ... It's true what they say: If you're unlucky, you can pick up syphilis from your own aunty! You're really in a mess now. If you don't say who you slept with, the doctors won't treat you. And as soon as you say that you slept with a casual acquaintance, your political career is as good as finished!"

"What shall I do?" he asked, grabbing Larin's hand in terror.

"Don't touch me, you might infect me with that filth! Unlike you, I'm a family man and I treasure that." Larin pushed the trembling hand away. "Things look bad for you, to put it mildly. So marry her, otherwise, I repeat, things are really bad. Nobody will understand you: not the party, not the VD clinic! If you mention her name at the clinic, she'll frame you ..."

"How?" he asked naively.

"Elementary, she'll say she didn't infect you, you infected her! Who's going to help you then, you dunderhead? You could end up behind bars for the premeditated transmission of sexual diseases."

"Is she really that vicious and depraved?"

"She is a member of the party, so I would ask you to choose your expressions more carefully! Where do you think she got that disease, anyway? The whole problem is that there are plenty of others like you in the party, carriers of all sorts of contagion. You reward each other with all sorts of repulsive garbage, and she is merely your victim. You don't acknowledge any kind of

morality, the most important thing for all of you is to gratify your lust. I can only see one way out – you have to marry her, otherwise she will have the moral right to blacken your name. But if you get married and go to the clinic arm in arm, no one will be able to accuse you of depravity: an ordinary, everyday infection, anyone could get one of those! And what's more, we're all solidly behind you, to a man. What do you say? Why don't we announce your wedding for next Saturday, eh? Instead of the Leninist work-day! The people will be delighted!" Larin jotted something down in his notepad. "So, in three days time, we make merry. Well now, everything has really turned out rather well, my congratulations, and you may prepare for the celebrations!"

"I can't do that! How can I marry her, if she ..."

"Stop the hysterics! What if she should hear about it?"

"But I don't even know her at all, give me some time to think!" he pleaded.

Larin was astounded by his stubbornness.

"Take as much time as you like! But complications could set in, it's a long, long time from now until next Saturday, and in a week you could easily find yourself completely impotent. My advice to you is: announce your forthcoming marriage before everybody goes home and invite them to the wedding. Or do you really not give a damn about your health?"

And he had obediently trotted along the corridor, catching his colleagues as they were already leaving to go home and inviting them to his wedding. Someone had asked the name of his bride, and he had had to go back to Larin.

"There, that's the shape morals are in around here," Larin exclaimed, profoundly agitated. "Sleeping with a woman without even knowing her name! After that the rest is scarcely surprising ..."

"But I did know her name, it's on the tip of my tongue, only I can't remember it ...!"

"Come on then, show me your tongue!" Larin exclaimed in alarm. "Open your mouth! Yes, just as I thought ... Never remind me again that you have a tongue, keep it firmly behind your teeth, the terrible symptoms have already appeared on it too. Her name's Muza, and don't you put the wedding off, or you're a goner. That's the way of it, my friend ..."

Three days later there was a wedding. No worse than anybody else's. And the important thing was that it was all very boisterous and jolly and there was no shortage of drink. He himself was in a state of intense merriment the whole time, and he kept grabbing his male member, which itched constantly, putting his hands into his trousers by turns. He even did it as he saw the guests off. At the sight of the abundance on the wedding table that evening, people realised what they had been bound to realise some time – that sooner or later they would have to learn to show respect to the former errand boy, who was clearly not as simple and straightforward as he had seemed. And he, for his part, saw that people were always ready to enjoy a fling at someone else's expense, and he drew a conclusion for the future: to conceal your sins, you had to be lavish in entertaining the witnesses. At the table they called him a real man, and they called the bride a moon-faced symbol of innocence. Then he winked cunningly at Larin, as if to say: see how people respect me – you should realise that some day you too will have to learn to do the same! Larin shrugged, as if to say: you and I are already great friends anyway. On that occasion he solemnly declared, without taking his hands out of his trouser pockets, that he had decided to devote the whole of his life exclusively to people. And the guests went home in a joyful mood, and the bridegroom himself was smiling ...

These events had still not been forgotten by the two very close friends walking along a deserted street in the capital late in the evening. They had that privilege – of reminiscing ... but as for all the other citizens of this country, for them "unofficial" reminiscences were fraught with mortal danger. People were recommended to speak of that which *was* at present and *would be* in the

future. But the direct perception of present reality, just as it was, was not permitted, let alone the filtering of it through your own feelings and observations, or using your eyes and your ears for their intended purpose, for trying to make sense of what was going on. It was only permitted to see what had been officially corrected, it was the civic duty of every citizen to compose a picture that corresponded in every detail to the officially approved scheme of perception. Any deviation from this rule engendered doubts on the part of the authorities, and an individual might be deprived of any further opportunity of direct interaction with external reality.

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